A New Islander Profile

by George E. Mortimore

60 YEARS a BAKER

FRANZ LOUIS WILLE is still baking bread the way his father used to make it, in the same oven.

At the age of 77, he is a veteran of 60 years in the baking trade. His bread has acquired such a high reputation that customers line up for it almost every day when the store on Johnson Street opens for business at 11.30 a.m. The store never opens earlier.

The bakery is at the back. The firm is not in the wholesale trade. Its entire production is sold over the counter of the one store.

The bakery sells out almost every day before closing time. Customers—some of whom were the master baker's schoolmates at the old Boys' Central School and have been buying bread from father and son all their lives—often book a few loaves in advance, so that they won't be disappointed.

Every year he closes his store for the entire month of July, and his loyal customers have to satisfy themselves with someone else's bread.

Wille's is one of the few places where one can buy pumpernickle bread, made in the time-honored way—heavy, close-packed and nutritious. It is a sour-dough preparation, made without yeast.

But pumpernickle is only one of many varieties of bread, buns, cakes and pies that are made in the old bakery by Mr. Wille and his grandson, Gordon Wille Stewart, who is learning the trade. Mrs. Wille works in the store. Average daily production of the store is 600 loaves.

"A lot of the bread turned out of bakeries today tastes like chalk full of bubbles," I said to Mr. Wille. "Why is that?"

Mr. Wille, busy lifting loaves from his oven at the end of a 15-foot paddle-like apparatus called a peal, made no answer.

"He wants to know why some bread is no good," said his grandson, relaying the information.

FORMULA FOODS

"I don't hear too well sometimes," Mr. Wille explained. "Yes, well, if you don't like the bread, you can't blame the baker. In the big bakeries, it's all baked according to a formula from the head office. The baker has to follow it, and put in exactly what the formula says, no more.

"Nowadays, it's just the head fellows in the big shops that are bakers. The rest of them are machine men. There are hardly any of the old-time bakers left.

"The old-type of oven, made all of bricks, bakes a better loaf. The ovens that are part metal don't bake as well. There's some life in brick; there's no life in the steel. You don't seem to get your same taste in the bread.

"The trouble is, today, they've taken all the good out of the soil. They can't produce the flour they used to. They've taken the cream out of the land, and they haven't put it back.

"At one time, all you had to put in bread was salt, water and yeast. Now you have to put in shortening, honey, sugar, salt, malt, yeast, flour and water, to make up for what's missing."

"Do all bakers put in all those extra things" I asked.

"Not all the things we put in," admitted Mr. Stewart.

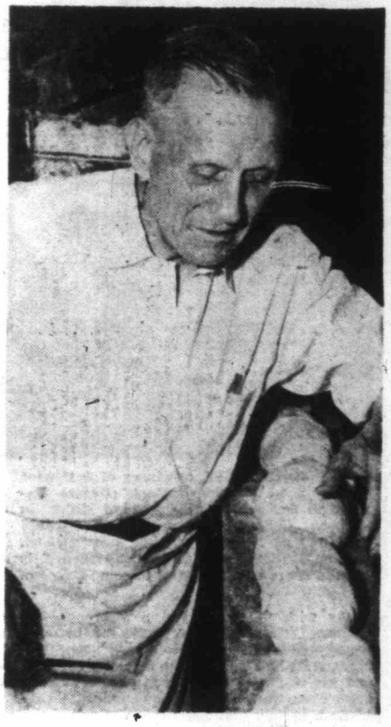
"The old way was the best way to make bread," Mr. Wille observed.

However, he has made some concessions to changing times. His father used to make all his old yeast—"potato barm" boiled up from hops, malt, flour and potatoes. But it took several hours to make. Mr. Wille now buys commercial yeast.

All dough used to be mixed by hand. Now, however, it's done in a machine. The conventionally-shaped loaves are moulded by machinery, too.

However, the fancy types of gnarled, knobbly bread must be fashioned by hand. One of Mr. Wille's first tasks, when he was a schoolboy of 12, was to learn the process of "chaffing" a loaf—make a lump of dough puff into a globular shape with a deft, one-handed motion.

Since the dough tends to become hard if it has been mauled about too much, the "chaffing" must be done fast. It took the young Wille some time to learn this art, and his grandson is also finding it tricky to master.



FRANZ LOUIS WILLE

This treatment is needed for the so-called "two-pound cob" loaf.

Mr. Wille's father, Louis, was both a miller and a baker in Saxony. He came to Canada before the Franco-Prussian War; had a bakery in New Westminster, where he supplied both the penitentiary and the mental hospital, among other institutions.

He was also bandmaster of the Hyack band in the Royal City.

Someone offered to sell him 160 acres of what is now downtown Vancouver for $1 an acre. The plan was to raise cattle on it for sale in Victoria and New Westminster. But Mr. Wille judged that the land was not good enough for crops and pasture, so he turned down the offer.

He bought 20 acres of what is now Port Angeles for $1 an acre, re-sold it for $6,000.

HERE IN 1887

His New Westminster bakery was such a profitable enterprise that he was in constant fear of being held up and robbed of the receipts. He entrusted the money at regular intervals to Mr. Bishop, purser of the paddle-wheeler R. P. Rithet, who took the cash over to a bank in Victoria.

Eventually Mr. Wille decided to go where his money went. In 1887, he put up a building on Johnson Street and transferred the bakery there.

Mr. Wille junior is still in business in the same store. He still uses the same oven. But the arched top portion of the oven has been renewed three tims.

The elder Wille had several other enterprises. He bought 160 acres and built a house at the top of Esquimalt Legoon. There he ran a dairy farm.

With two sons, and Franz Louis and brother Fred (now a waiter at the Poodle Dog Cafe) Mr. Wille milked 30 cows and took the milk in his store, where he sold it at 10 cents a quart to hotel and restaurant men who took it away into their own pails and pitchers.

That wasn't all. The resourceful Mr. Wille also owned three sealing schooners, all of which came to grief in one way or another.

One schooner was seized by the Russians. It was worth $10,00 or $12,000. Years later, the Russian government came through with $500 compensation.

Franz Louis Wille was the oldest of six children—five brothers and a sister. They lived in an apartment above the bakery. Franz Louis, an able athlete, sometimes used to run all the way home from Boys' Central School for lunch. (He won a number of sprint races; also rowed for JBAA, played lacrosse and football).

The family spent some of the time at the farm by the Lagoon. Franz Louis Wille remembers how good the shooting was. Sometimes he knocked down half a dozen ducks with a shot; came back with a boatload.

Most of the schemes that Mr. Wille senior had failed to yield the hoped-for profit. He sold the farm. But the bakery was a steady money maker. Besides bread, he sold such assorted items as straw hats, sugar, bolts of cloth and plug tobacco.

Had things happened differently, the place might have turned into a kind of department store. But it was destined to remain a bakery.

PRICES BOOM!

"Flour used to sell for $1 for a 50-pound sack," says F. J. Wille, harking back to old prices. "Sometimes it went as low as 75 cents a sack. Now it's $5.10 for a 100-lb. sack.

"We used to buy flour by carload lots and store it in the basement. One time, Jim Walsh, myself and his brother unloaded a car in an hour and a half at the E. & N. Station, and piled all of it in the basement.

"The oven used to be wood-fired. Now it's oil."

Brother Hugo Wille and sister Selma are now dead. Gus is manager of a Seattle restaurant; Carl runs an electrical store in Modesto, California.

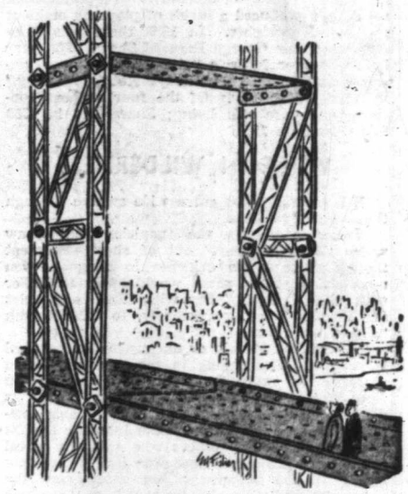
Some of F. J. Wille's faithful customers were worried in case the family tradition of making fine bread should be lost when Mr. Wille retires. The Willes had only daughters.

However, grandson Gordon Wille Stewart, a tall, relaxed young man, is taking up the family trade with enthusiasm, and seems likely to match the high standards that his grandfather set.

The two of them, clad in white smocks, answered my questions politely as they shovelled bread in an out of the oven and deftly whipped dough into shape on a large floury table.

"How can you tell when the loaves are ready to take out?" I asked Mr. Stewart, peering into the hot, fragrant inside of the oven, where loaves of varied shape were browning.

"By the look and the feel of them, you can tell," he said. "It takes some practise. It's an art."



"Oh, he's a talented architect—it's just that emotionally, he's never grown up."